DOCUMENT RESUME

ED 367 103 EC 302 805

AUTHOR	Ysseldyke, James E.; And Others
TITLE	Looking at School Choice: Parents' Comments on Open Enrollment and Their Children with Disabilities. Research Report No. 6. Enrollment Options for Students with Disabilities.
INSTITUTION	Minnesota Univ., Minneapolis. Coll. of Education.
SPONS AGENCY	Special Education Programs (ED/OSERS), Washington, DC.
PUB DATE	May 92
CONTRACT	H023C0004
NOTE	33p.; For other reports in this series, see ED 343 361-364, EC 302 748, and EC 302 806-811.
PUB TYPE	Reports - Research/Technical (143)
EDRS PRICE	MF01/PC02 Plus Postage.
DESCRIPTORS	*Disabilities; Elementary Secondary Education; *Free Choice Transfer Programs; *Gifted; Open Enrollment; *Parent Attitudes; *Participant Satisfaction; *School Choice; Special Needs Students; State Programs; State Surveys; Transfer Students
IDENTIFIERS	*Minnesota

ABSTRACT

Ninety-nine parents of students with special needs who participated in Minnesota's 1990-91 open enrollment program responded to a survey item which asked for their comments on their child's participation in the program. Twelve broad topics were identified within the content of these responses: teacher/administration attitudes, transportation/location of schools, educational programs for special student needs, students' attitude and behavior change as a result of transfer, social and educational continuity for the student, changes in students' academic performance as a result of transfer, social environment of schools, responsiveness of school administrators, parent empowerment, physical environment of the school and funding, effectiveness of teachers, and curricula and extracurricular activities of schools. The majority of respondents reported satisfaction with the open enrollment program. Responses of parents of students with disabilities (n=80) are compared to responses of parents of students served in gifted programs (n=19), and responses of parents living in rural areas (n=47) are compared to responses of parents in urban and suburban areas (n=52). (Contains 17 references.) (Author/JDD)

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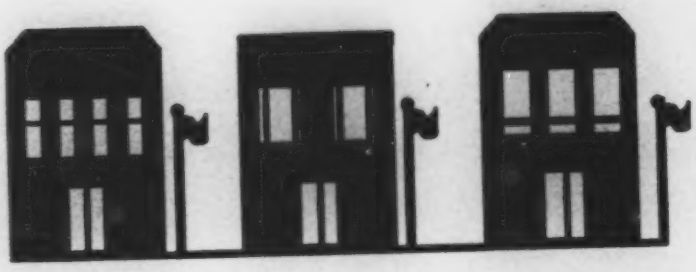
Research Report No. 6



Enrollment Options for Students with Disabilities

James E. Ysseldyke, Cheryl M. Lange,
Yiu-Yeung Lau, and Thomas J. Delaney

The College of Education
UNIVERSITY OF MINNESOTA

May, 1992

EC 302805

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Abstract

Ninety-nine parents of students with special needs who participated in Minnesota's 1990-1991 open enrollment program responded to a survey item which asked for their comments on their child's participation in this program. Twelve broad topics were identified within the content of these responses: teacher/ administration attitudes, transportation/location of schools, educational programs for special student needs, students' attitude and behavior change as a result of transfer, social and educational continuity for the student, changes in students' academic performance as a result of transfer, social environment of schools, responsiveness of school administrators, and parent empowerment. The majority of respondents reported satisfaction with the open enrollment program. Responses of parents of students with disabilities are compared to responses of parents of students served in gifted programs. Responses of parents living in rural areas are compared to responses of parents in urban and suburban areas.

This project was supported by Grant No. H023C0004 from the Office of Special Education Programs, U.S. Department of Education. The views expressed are those of the authors, and not necessarily of the funding agency.

Looking at School Choice: Parents' Comments on Open Enrollment and Their Children with Disabilities

There have been dramatic changes in the educational climate of the United States over the past two decades. These changes have included implementation of policies which provide opportunities to parents that were not available to them before. The policies have been developed in response to public demand for increased accountability and better education, and have resulted in a fundamental reshaping of the relationship between parents and the schools their children attend. One type of policy being implemented are programs for educational choice. Finn (1986) defines educational choice as "the conscious selection of a school, an education program, or a particular set of academic courses, as opposed to involuntary assignment." With the implementation of choice policies around the country, it is imperative for educators and administrators to determine how much these initiatives help the educational system to better meet the requirements parents have for the education of their children, and to examine the rationales and experiences parents have with regard to employing these options with their children.

Several types of educational choice, or "school choice" plans, have been implemented in various states. Open enrollment is one of the more prevalent of these plans. Basically, this policy allows students to enroll in primary or secondary schools outside of the school district in which they live. Over 15 states have implemented this type of policy under several names (Ysseldyke, Lange, & Delaney, 1992). These programs are designed

to enable parents to choose the school their children attend from among all available public schools (and in a few cases private schools as well) in the state. In most states, the criteria for choosing a school are at the discretion of the parents and the students. Hypothetically, allowing all parents open access to public schools should improve the quality of education provided by these schools to all students (Swap, 1990). There are other arguments that support and oppose this and related hypotheses.

Arguments against choice in education include: parents are already able to exercise a degree of educational choice by virtue of where they choose to live; choice policies will create a two-tiered school system of popular well-funded schools and unpopular poorly funded schools which less mobile students would have to attend; socioeconomic segregation will result as well as segregation of students by ability; and the possibility that as students are drawn from a larger geographical area, parental involvement in schools will decrease (Bastian, 1989; Boschee & Hunt, 1990; Finn, 1986; Glenn, 1986; Glenn, 1991; Nathan, 1985).

Arguments in support of choice include: choice policies will make education more equitable, allowing parents of different socioeconomic backgrounds and parents of students with different levels of ability to access the same schools and programs for their children; parents will identify and access those schools whose resources particularly match their child's educational needs, which will improve their child's academic performance; and that this empowerment of parents will lead to increased parental

involvement in schools (Boschee & Hunt, 1990; Finn, 1986; Glenn, 1986; Nathan, 1985).

Current research in educational choice addresses the validity of some of these concerns. One important issue is, when parents are given choice, how do they choose the schools their children attend? A study by Nault and Uchitelle (1982) found that parents in a small open enrollment system listed the general atmosphere of the school, the principal's attitude and philosophy, teachers' teaching styles and classroom skills, and the overall curriculum and academic programs of the school as factors in their choice of a school. Myra Kopf (1983, cited in Chenoweth, 1991) stated during the early eighties that parents were choosing alternative schools for their instructional programs. However, she now states that parents choose schools for their climates (Chenoweth, 1991). Finn (1986) cites evidence from the Rand Corporation's Alum Rock experiment and concludes that parents preponderantly choose schools based on non-instructional criteria such as location of the school, usually choosing schools closer to home, even with the provision of free transportation. An important observation about this research is that students with disabilities, students who are gifted, and their parents, are often not differentiated from students and parents in general. This circumstance leaves educators and administrators with a deficit of information about the implications of educational choice for these special populations.

In Minnesota, 6% of open enrollment applications for the 1990-1991 school year were by students who were identified by

their parents on the application form as having a disability, or some other requirement for a specialized educational program (gifted, English as a second language, Chapter One, etc.). These are parents and students with educational requirements which differ in many ways from their peers. It is important to consider the extent to which these same educational requirements effect the criteria and experiences these families have when they choose schools for attendance. These criteria and experiences reflect the ability of open enrollment programs to better serve the educational needs of students in special populations. The purpose of our study was to identify the factors related to decisions made by parents of these children to use open enrollment, and to examine the costs and benefits these families have experienced as a result of this decision.

Parents of children with disabilities and special needs were sent a survey which asked for information about their use of open enrollment. The survey asked for their reasons for transfer, demographic information about the transferring student and their family, how decisions about open enrollment were made by the family, and involvement of the parents with schools (Ysseldyke, Lange, Gorney, & Lau, 1992). Included in the survey was an opportunity for the parents to comment on their experiences with open enrollment. These parents provided many detailed comments about the circumstances which compelled them to have their children change schools, and the costs and benefits they and their children have experienced as a result of their decision. We will discuss these detailed accounts in our paper.

Three research questions pertinent to the responses provided by parents guide our discussion:

1. What are the major themes in the experiences of parents of children with disabilities and gifted children who participated in Minnesota's Open Enrollment program in the 1990-1991 school year?
2. To what extent are these themes functions of the services required by students with disabilities and students who are identified as gifted?
3. To what extent are these themes functions of the locale in which these parents reside?

Method

Purpose

In this study we are only examining the comments provided by parents of students with disabilities and students who are identified as gifted about their participation in Minnesota's Open Enrollment Program (one of seven school choice options available in Minnesota). Comments were categorized in order to examine the motivating factors and experiences these parents had in using open enrollment as part of their children's education.

Instrument

The final item of the Open Enrollment Parent Survey (Ysseldyke, Lange, & Delaney, 1991) asked respondents to "Please add any comments you have concerning open enrollment and your child's participation." This item was included in the survey in

order to gather qualitative data from parents which may not have been assessed by the items in the remainder of the survey.

Procedure

In May of 1991, we mailed 347 copies of the Open Enrollment Parent Survey to parents of children receiving special services who applied for the 1990-1991 Open Enrollment Program of Minnesota. In this study, we examined 99 responses provided in returned surveys by parents of children identified in the survey as participating in special education programs (N=80), or as gifted (N=19).

Two research assistants reviewed the 99 responses and qualitative analysis indicated there were 12 broad topics which were addressed by parents (see Table 1).

Statements from parents' comments frequently referred to at least one of these topics. For example, the statement "I would like to see busing available for out-of-district kids to the schools they are attending," found in one parent's comment, refers to the topic of Transportation/Location in the topic set. Using these topics as a set of categories, we could categorize whole responses by taking each topic and determining whether or not it was addressed by statements in the response. For example, a given response may address the first and third topics, whereas a response provided by a different parent may address the first, second, and ninth topics.

All of the responses were reviewed again; this time identification and coding of categories were discussed for each response. Then a frequency count of the number of responses which

Table 1

Twelve Broad Topics Identified from Parent Responses

1. Teacher/Administration Attitude	Statements about the attitudes of administrators and teachers towards students, the school itself, and the school community.
2. Transportation/Location	Comments about the problems or benefits of choosing a school in terms of transportation, and the school's proximity to such things as the parent's place of work, daycare facilities, and the home.
3. Educational Programs for Special Student Needs	Comments about the level of match between special educational programs at schools and the instructional needs of the student, including such things as mainstreaming of students with disabilities, placement of students in Special Education programs.
4. Student's Attitude and Behavior Change	Comments about changes in the student's school-related behavior and affect as a result of choosing to attend a different school.
5. Social and Educational Continuity	Parent comments concerning choosing schools in order to continue their child within a given school or school district, or in order to keep that child with his or her cohort of peers. This includes the issue of transition for the student staying in a school district or changing schools.
6. Changes in Student's Academic Performance	Statements about changes in the student's academic performance or "progress" as a result of choosing to attend a school outside of his or her school district.
7. Social Environment of Schools	Comments about characteristics of the student body at the school of choice or the school transferred from in terms of behavior, socio-economic status, and the social environment in general.
8. Responsiveness of School Administrations	Statements about the degree to which school administrators meet the requests and needs of parents of students, and the manner of providing educational services to the school and community.
9. Parent Empowerment	Comments about the ability of parents to choose housing where they wish, the degree of involvement which they may attain in their child's school, and their ability to investigate and access educational options for their child.

Table 1 (continued)

10. Physical Environment of the School and Funding	Comments about the layout and decor of the school and its related facilities, and the amount of monetary resources available to the school for maintenance and development of programs and facilities.
11. Effectiveness of Teachers in Schools	Comments about the ability of teachers productively to use class-time, develop working relationships with students conducive to learning, and to respond to the requests and needs of parents for their child's education.
12. Curricula and Extra-Curricular Activities of Schools	Comments about the variety, depth, and areas of emphasis of subjects taught in schools, and the availability and quality of extra-curricular activities.

addressed (i.e. contained some statement concerning) each of the 12 categories was done. In addition, a frequency count was completed of the number of responses in which parents commented that they were satisfied with Minnesota's open enrollment program.

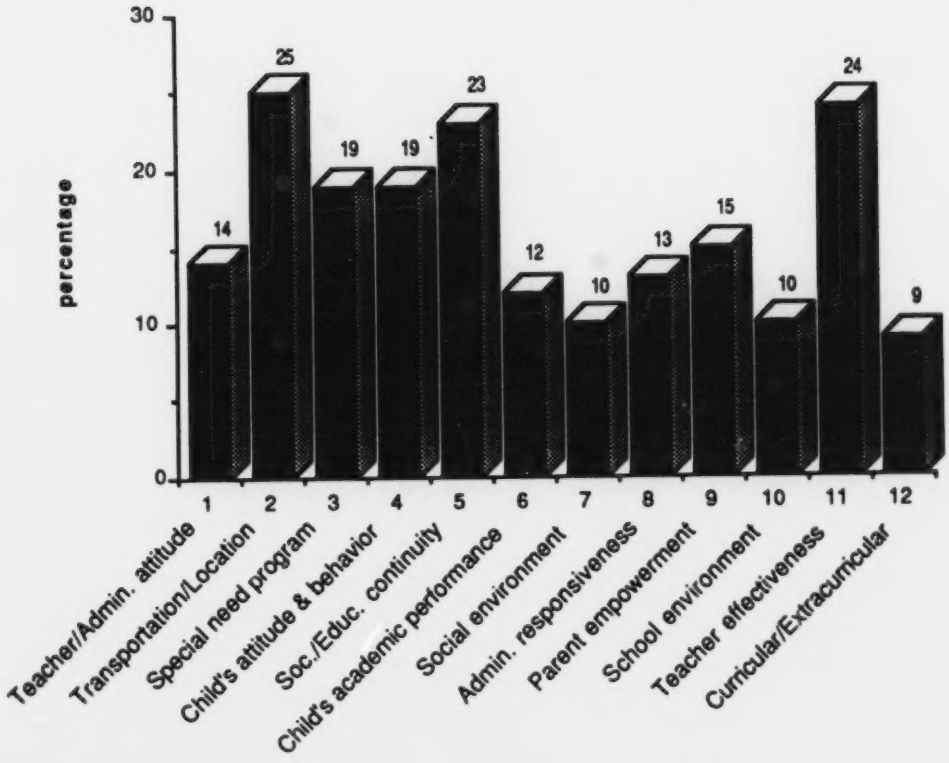
For purposes of this paper, we examined the responses made by parents of students with disabilities and students who are served in gifted programs. These responses were also separated on the basis of locale, i.e. responses by parents residing in metropolitan areas and parents residing in rural areas were separated within each group. Parents in metropolitan areas were defined as those who had marked their locale of residence as either "urban" or "suburban" in the survey.

Results

One hundred and ninety three comments were identified from the 99 respondents returning the parent survey. The number of comments within each of the 12 categories ranged from 9 to 25. Overall, the most frequently reported comments are found in the areas of transportation/location, teacher effectiveness, and social-educational continuity. In Figure 1, we report the percentages of comments reported by the 99 respondents in each category.

The survey respondents appeared eager to share their experiences about the open enrollment option with us. After completing seven pages of survey questions, over half of the respondents who open enrolled their child wrote additional comments. The review of these comments suggests that the open

Figure 1. Parent Comments - All



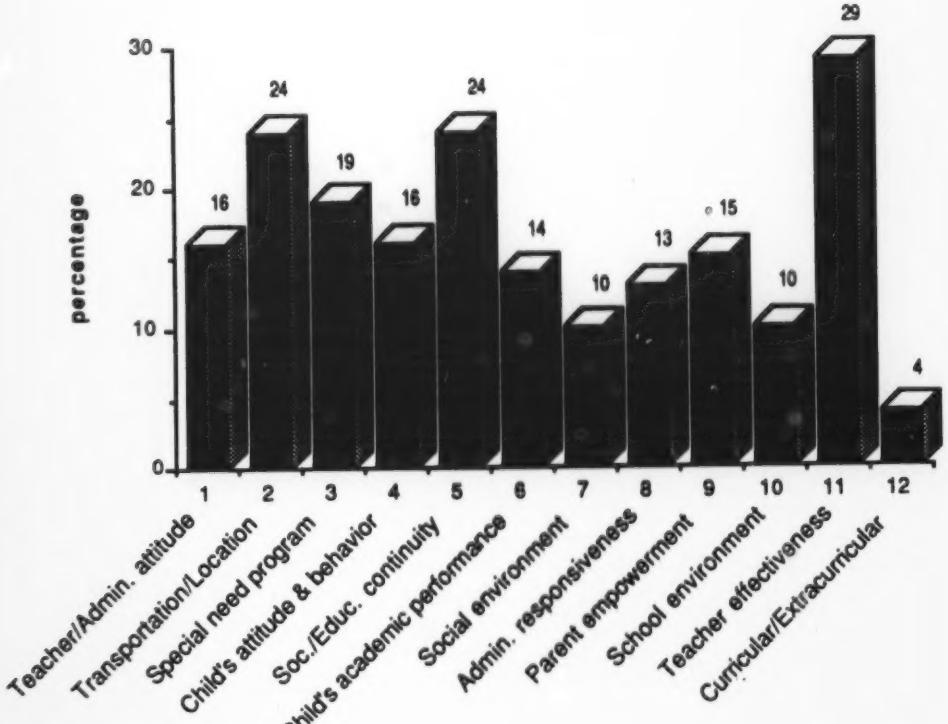
enrollment option, by and large, was a positive experience for these parents. Forty-five percent of the parents explicitly expressed their satisfaction with the option and/or how much they liked the chosen school. They reported that their families and children have benefited from the transfer. Only one parent, whose child has a behavioral concern, reported that she was "very unhappy" with their chosen school.

Students Who Received Special Education Services

Eighty percent (N=80) of the respondents were parents of children reported as receiving special education services at non-resident schools during the 1990-1991 school year. The percentages of comments drawn from these 80 respondents for each category are reported in Figure 2. The most frequent concern of these parents is teacher effectiveness (29%). Parents indicated they were either dissatisfied with the teachers and the program at their resident schools or pleased with the teachers and the program at their chosen schools. Transportation/location was the second most frequently reported concern (24%). Within the transportation theme, parents stated concerns about busing, their transportation expenses, and the matter of "convenience". Twenty-four percent of the parents reported that they open enrolled their children to non-resident schools in order to maintain their children's social and educational continuity.

Of the 80 respondents, 46% (N=38) of them live in the urban and suburban areas, while 52% (N=42) reside in rural areas. In Figure 3, we report the percentages of comments reported by parents for each category at each residential location. When we

Figure 2. Students Served in Special Education Programs



look more closely at the residential locales of these families, some differences are notable in their patterns of response. More parents in urban and suburban areas commented on social-educational continuity (34% vs 14%) and school environment (16% vs 5%) than those in rural areas. On the other hand, more parents (36%) in the greater Minnesota (rural) areas brought up teacher effectiveness as an issue than their city counterpart (21%). For other categories, the proportion of comments shared by parents at different locales was nearly even. Examples of comments were:

Teacher Effectiveness

- Some of the teachers, one in particular, even called [the students with special needs] dumb to their face.
- The staff is much better in the new district, and have a better understanding concerning his disabilities.

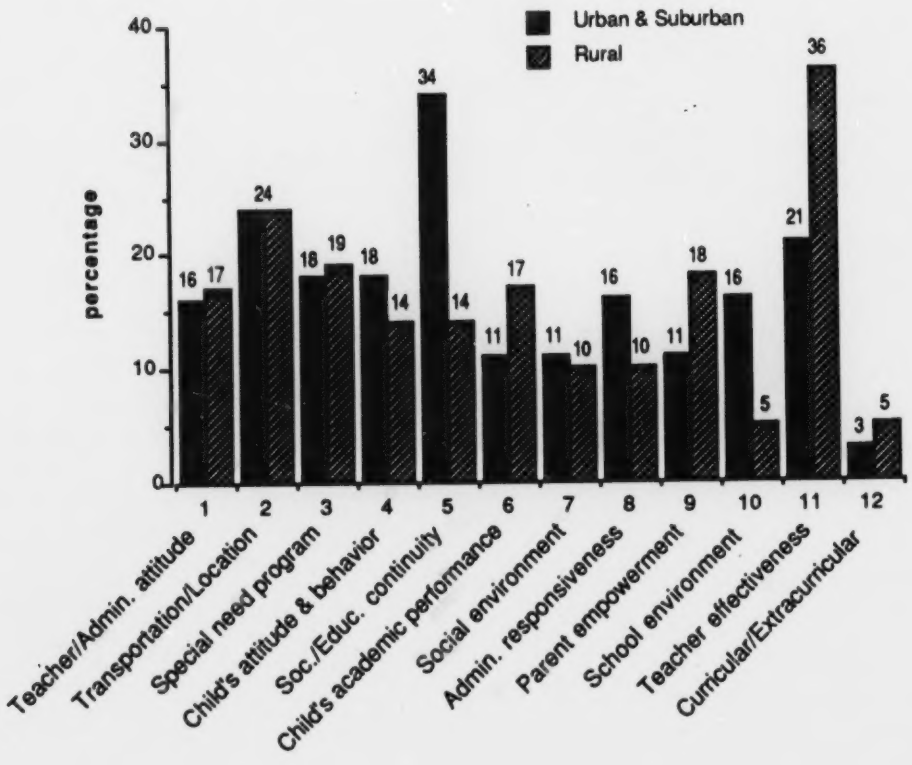
Transportation/Location

- [My child's] day-care is only a few block[s] from [the chosen school].
- The only problem we have had with the open enrollment plan is the transportation.

Social-educational Continuity

- Our biggest reason for changing schools was to keep both our sons in one school straight through graduation.
- It was very important to me to keep his same day-care provider for reasons relating to his special educational needs and years already spent with her.

Figure 3. Students Served in Special Education Programs



School Environment

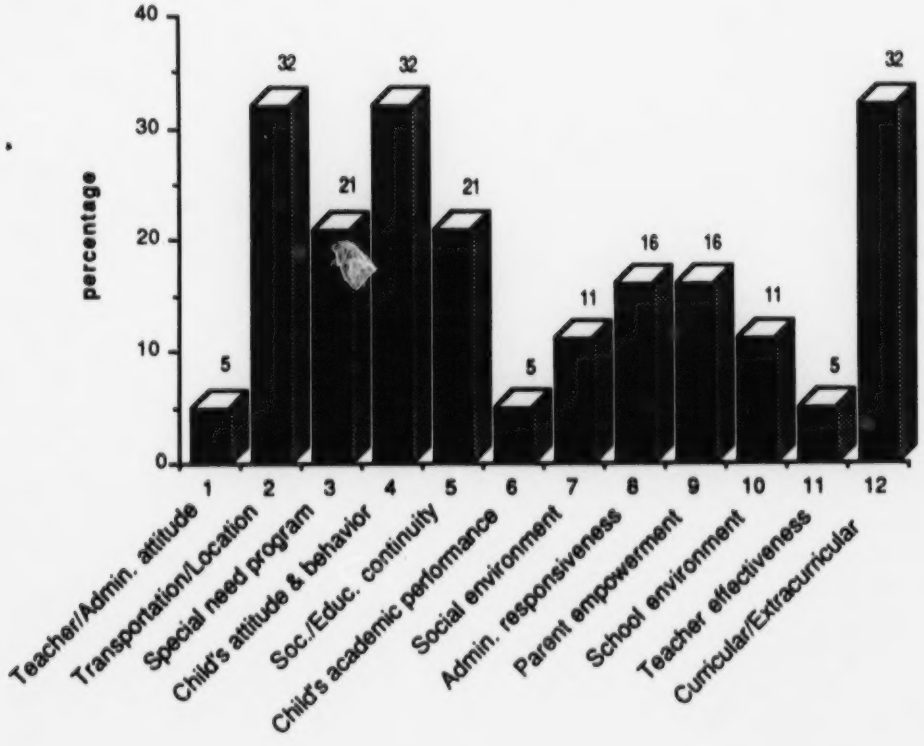
- He enjoyed attending a smaller school.
- The home district schools are too crowded.

Students Who Were Served In Gifted Programs

Nineteen percent (N=19) of the 99 respondents were parents of children served in gifted programs at non-resident schools during the 1990-1991 school year. In Figure 4, we report the percentages of comments contributed by these parents for each category. Our data indicate that child's attitude and behavior change, transportation/location, and curricula and extracurricular activities are the most frequently noted issues. Thirty-two percent of these parents reported that they have concerns about transportation/location; a majority of them stated that they have problems providing transportation for their children to go to the non-resident schools. Furthermore, 32% of the 19 respondents reported that their children's attitude and behavior have improved; their children are "happy", "thrilled", and "fulfilled" at their chosen schools. Some parents (32%) open enrolled their children because their chosen school provides a wider variety of curricula.

Of these 19 respondents, a majority of them (N=14) resided in urban and suburban areas; only 5 were from the greater Minnesota areas. More parents in urban and suburban areas reported social-educational continuity (29% vs 0%) and administration responsiveness (21% vs 0%) as concerns than parents in rural areas. On the other hand, 80% of parents who live outside urban and suburban areas indicated that the availability and the extent

Figure 4. Students Served in Gifted Programs



of curricula and extracurricular activities were an issue, while only 14% of parents in urban areas did so. Because the sample size in the greater Minnesota areas was very small (N=5), this interpretation should be made with caution. For other categories, the proportion of comments in terms of different residential locations for each category is quite similar. The percentages of comments shared by these parents at different residential locations for each category are shown in Figure 5. The following are some examples of comments contributed by these parents:

Attitude and Behavior Change

- It has been a time and money sacrifice, but the magnet school has saved my child's interest in school.
- Now at [the chosen school] she loves school and is learning and growing.

Transportation/Location

- It would not have been possible for us without transportation provided by [the chosen school district].
- Transportation is a major problem for us.

Curricula and Extracurricular Activities

- Excellent music program.
- We also wanted a wider variety of academic, extracurricular, and social choices for her.

Social-educational Continuity

- We have been very happy with open enrollment. It has enabled [our child] to continue at [the chosen school] and to continue his progress.

- Friendships and her standing as a leader figured into the decision too.

Administrative Responsiveness

- We do wish, however, that we didn't have to reapply every year at Christmas time.

Special Education vs Gifted Programs

When we compare the number of comments from parents of children with disabilities to those from parents of children reported as gifted, we notice that there are some differences in emphasis. More parents of children with disabilities commented on academic improvement (14% vs 5%), teacher/administration attitude (16% vs 5%), and teacher effectiveness (29% vs 5%). On the other hand, 32% of parents whose children were served in gifted programs indicated that curricula & extracurricular activities were their concern; whereas, only 4% of parents of children with disabilities noted curriculum as a concern. In Figure 6, we report the percentages of comments made by 99 respondents of each group for each category.

Discussion

The purpose of this paper was to discern parents' perceptions of open enrollment. Only parents of children with disabilities and/or students served in gifted programs are included in this review.

Urban and Suburban vs Rural Areas

Our data suggest that there are some differences in patterns of response as a function of parents' residential location. For

Figure 5. Students Served in Gifted Programs

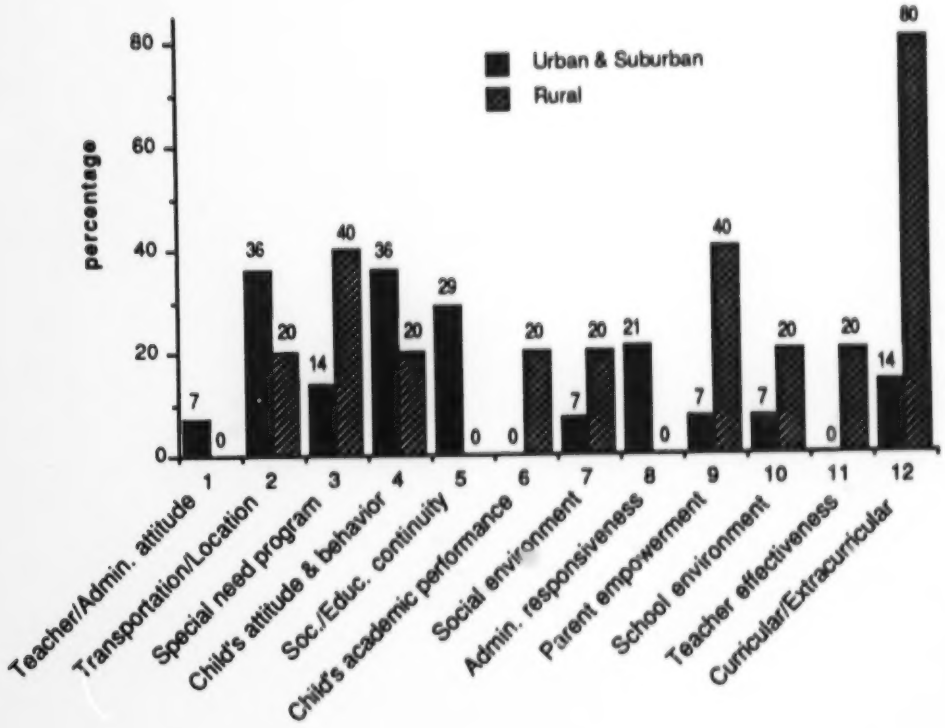
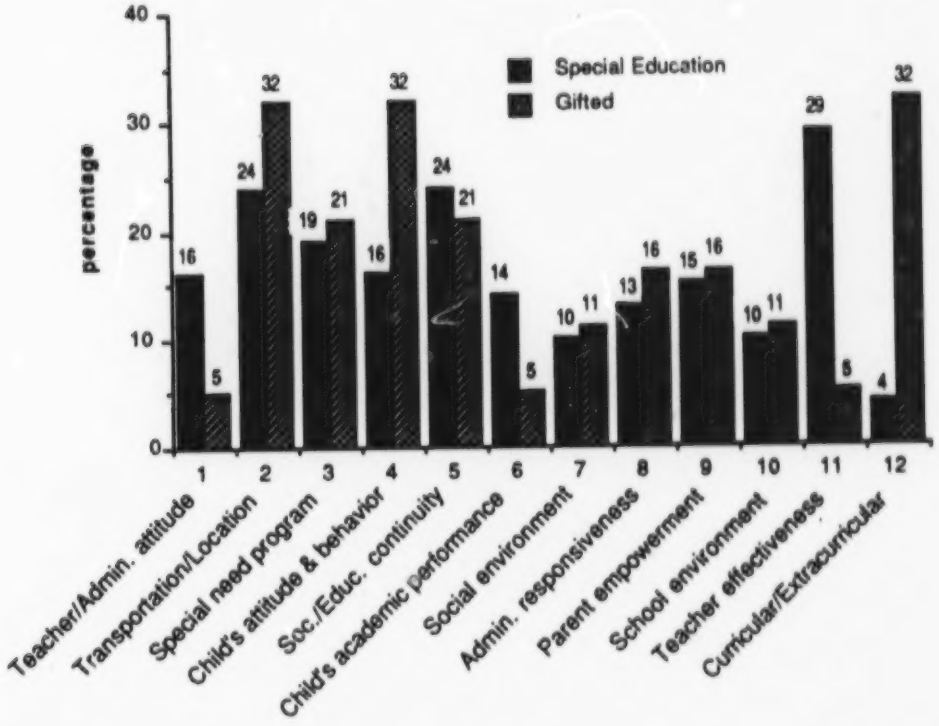


Figure 6. Students Served in Special Education vs Gifted Programs



parents of children with disabilities, those who live in urban and suburban areas commented more frequently on social-educational continuity. One of the possible explanations is that people in the city may move more often than those in rural areas. Many families moved to another school district and the parents took advantage of the open enrollment option to keep their children in the same school since their children are "making good progress and doing well." Moreover, these children do not need to readjust to new academic and social environments. Our data also suggest that parents from urban and suburban areas prefer smaller schools.

Teacher effectiveness is the most frequently cited concern for parents in rural areas, and it appears to be one of the stronger motives prompting these parents to transfer their children out of their resident schools (see Figure 3). These parents contend that teachers at their chosen schools are more competent, treat students better, spend more time teaching, and are more responsive to parents. A parent complained that, "some teachers had no time in [the] classroom to help those students [with special needs] that needed a bit more direction or explanation in [the] classroom" at the resident school; conversely, another parent reported that his child "receive[d] a maximum amount of attention and concern for [the child's] development" at their chosen school.

For parents of children reported as gifted, it is difficult to draw a meaningful explanation for the different emphases between residential locales because the sample sizes are very

small - 5 respondents in the rural areas and 14 in the urban and suburban areas.

Students with Disabilities vs Those in Gifted Programs

Our data suggest that parents of children with disabilities have put considerable emphasis on how much the academic performance of their children has improved, how well they and their children are treated by teachers and administrators, and how competent teachers are in providing services to their children. A parent reported that, "[My child] has had [an] excellent teacher at [the chosen school], and she has made great progress. She has a great attitude toward learning, and has developed better social skills." Another parent commented that, "The philosophy of [the non-resident school] was unique. 'Be kind to each other!' Children there had a caring and helping attitude so different from [the resident school]." In other words, these parents are concerned about how well provided special services meet the educational needs of their children.

On the other hand, parents of children who are served in gifted programs are more concerned about the variety and depth of curricula. The focus is primarily on the opportunities for these students to fulfill their potentials; teachers and other school personnel are considered to play a minor role. One parent shared that her daughter "was so frustrated by the slow pace and reading materials for classes such as science and social science that she felt insulted her intelligence by defining simple (to her) terms" at the resident school. Another parent expressed that her daughter has benefited from "gifted programs, extracurricular

activities (environmental organization she co-founded, etc.), and courses (U.S.S.R., etc.)" at their chosen school. Therefore, these parents placed more emphaiss on their children's personal growth and quality of curricula than on the attitudes or ability of school personnel.

General Themes

We have learned that parents transfer their children for a variety of reasons that are based upon the special needs of their children and unique family circumstances. A lack of a unified theme is not surprising as we would expect that children with disabilities and those reported as gifted would have different needs and their parents would have different concerns. Interestingly, we do find two consistent themes across programs and residential locations.

First, many parents expressed that they are "pleased" and "appreciate" the open enrollment option which allows them "to make the choice of where [their] children were to go to school." Again, 45% of the 99 respondents paid compliments to the open enrollment option and/or the chosen schools. These parents reported that their children have been served better, have improved their attitude and academic performance, and are happier at the chosen school. One parent commented, "We have benefited from open enrollment. We have nothing but positive comments about our chosen school and the special program it offers." Another parent stated that her son "is more interested in school since he changed and knows he has a chance."

Second, many of the respondents, regardless of location or the program in which their child enrolled, reported that transportation/ location issues are concerns for them. Some of them have problems in providing transportation for their children to go to the non-resident schools. "Driving the 20 miles or so one way [in] rush hour has been a definite hardship." We also learned from a parent that her children will have to go back to a resident school because her husband, for medical reasons, cannot drive the children to the non-resident school anymore. Some parents would like to see busing available and a few wish that "some help could be provided with the transportation expenses." Others expressed that "convenience" is the reason that transferring has worked for their children and families. One parent stated that, "I am a single parent and my day-care is in the district where he attends."

Implications

Based on all the comments provided by respondents, it is apparent that they actively search for what they think is best for their families and/or their children's education. Parents of students with special needs look for schools where they believe their children will be better served by competent teachers. Some parents use open enrollment to further educational continuity after a move to another community or school district. These parents prefer to keep their children at a familiar school where they believe their children's educational needs are being appropriately met. Similarly, parents of students who are served in gifted programs focus on the quality of schools, searching for

an enriched environment where their children may develop to their full potential. Clearly, a quality education is a priority for all of these parents.

Apparently, transportation is one of the major obstacles for parents in accessing the open enrollment program. Although some transportation reimbursement funds are available for families with incomes at or below the poverty line, many applicants do not qualify. Without assistance, many families might not be able to participate in open enrollment. An ideal solution for parents would be that free complete transportation services be provided. An expensive practice such as this has been employed as part of a court-ordered desegregation plan in St. Louis. Our data suggest that some families are not able to participate in open enrollment because of a transportation problem. Not until this problem is addressed will equal access to open enrollment be possible for all families.

Many parents expressed that they are more satisfied with their children's education at their chosen schools. They believe their children enjoy these schools more and that their children's academic and social skills have improved. An interesting question to consider is the extent to which objective observations of a student's performance and instructional environment will be congruent with the parent's perceptions. In other words, does the school of choice have a better instructional environment? Is student achievement positively affected by the change of schools? Driscoll (1991) and Sosniak and Ethington (1991) examined the qualitative differences between public schools of choice and their

public counterparts. No differences were found in the level of resources for each group of schools nor in the level of innovation. However, differences were noted in level of parent satisfaction and the teacher-student relationship. The parents who had exercised their right to choose a school for their child were more satisfied than those who had continued at their resident school and the students at the choice schools believed they had better relationships with their teachers than those at the comparison schools.

Our findings support the importance of teacher-student relationships and we find that they play a major role in parent satisfaction with the schools of choice. The extent to which parents of students with disabilities transfer schools due to a lack of teacher effectiveness at the resident school should be further investigated. This may provide more information about the role this relationship plays in student and parent satisfaction within the schools. In addition, an investigation comparing a student's instructional environment and academic achievement before and after transferring schools would be beneficial to understanding the outcomes that occur as a result of participation in schools of choice.

Finally, parental involvement with schools and satisfaction with open enrollment are encouraging; yet, many parents of students with disabilities have not accessed open enrollment. Can we assume that parents who do not open enroll their children are satisfied with their children's education and have made a conscious choice not to transfer their children? Do all these

parents know about the opportunities available to them through open enrollment and do they know how to choose a school for their child? To what extent are families discouraged from participating in open enrollment because of technicalities such as transportation problems and a lack of information?

Our review of parent comments suggests that open enrollment has brought many opportunities to parents who are willing to be involved in their children's education. Furthermore, the majority of the parents of students with special needs who have used this option appear to be satisfied with it. Yet, the impact on students with special needs whose parents are not participating in open enrollment or whose parents are uninformed about this option remains to be determined.

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